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(U) THE VERBAL COMPONENT OF TERRORISM STRATEGY:  
A WEST GERMAN TEXTUAL CASE STUDY<sup>1/</sup>

Summary

Contemporary terrorism combines selective violence with reliance on language to articulate terrorist motivations, beliefs, and objectives. This paper, which abstracts a study that was made of major event-related statements by the West German terrorist group Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion, RAF), focuses on the language component.

The terrorist's awareness of the need to use and his ability to manipulate language contrast with the RAF's stated rejection of language as an ineffective political tool. The RAF's language objective--tied to violent intimidation--is to overturn the central government's claims to legitimacy, morality, a monopoly on the use of force, and popular support. RAF texts document the vital link between terrorist violence and its justification via the language instrument and illustrate the terrorists' competence in exploiting language's creative potential.

The analysis concludes that the RAF's language component fails both because of the unacceptability of terrorist political claims and because of the RAF's attempt to economize with language--by addressing multiple audiences via one text for each

<sup>1/</sup> The basic research for this study was carried out in part under the auspices of the Director of Central Intelligence's Exceptional Analyst Program. The entire study is incorporated in a Georgetown University Ph.D. dissertation (GU Thesis 5329, DA 8401507) dated May 1983. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the US Government.

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incident. The research shows how useful linguistics can be, along with other perspectives, in understanding terrorism; and it illustrates the political, analytical, and scientific value of a close examination of a terrorist group's statements, which are often the outsider's principal source of information about the group's intentions and beliefs.

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Introduction

President Reagan and his press spokesmen described the US action in Grenada as a "rescue mission"; the media continually referred to it as an "invasion." West European governments variously expressed their "understanding" of it, their "regret" that it took place, or their "support" for it. And so goes the daily exercise of mankind's most malleable tool--language.

In his remarks before the 1982 UN General Assembly, Secretary of State Shultz underscored the importance of language in terms of world affairs and individual rights:

"This hall has heard great ideas eloquently expressed. It has also heard double-talk, platitudes, and ringing protestations of innocence--all too often aimed at camouflaging outrageous and inhuman acts. But we must not ridicule words. I believe that the greatest advance in human history was not the wheel, the use of electricity, or the internal combustion engine. Indispensable to progress as these have been, our most remarkable achievement was the slow, clumsy but triumphant creation of language. It is words that released our ancestors from the prison of the solitary.... Is it not profoundly revealing that the first victims of tyrants are-- words? No people better know the meaning of freedom than those who have been arrested or beaten or imprisoned or exiled because of what they said. A single man speaking out--a Lech Walesa, for example--is more dangerous than an armored division." (Emphasis added.)

It is arguable whether linguists or politicians have the better understanding of language. But there can be no doubt that those who seek or exercise political power--and those who formulate political leaders' statements--understand the utility and manipulability of the language tool. Every speaker and every political movement seeks, consciously or otherwise, to impose his/her/its own labels, concepts, terminology, and definitions on listeners. Yet few of us, aside from reading an occasional op-ed commentary from the Edwin C. Newmans and William Safires lamenting the "misuse" or decline of language, ever focus on the central importance of language. Those of us engaged in political analysis, be it professionally or as critical observers, need to heed especially what linguists and philosophers call the "naming" or "labeling" process.

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Is there any doubt that it makes a difference whether the world "condemns" or "regrets" the Soviet attack on a civil airliner, that a violent political group is labeled "terrorists," "guerrillas," or "freedom fighters"? The objective of the terrorism-related study outlined herein was not simply to gauge the impact of a group's use of violence and of language, but to relate the two as complementary components of the contemporary practice of terrorism. It is the study's contention that, looking at West German society today, the impact of the language aspect of its terrorism experience has been significant, even though it is seldom noticed and is difficult to isolate.

One need only note the labels "hot autumn" and "peace movement" in the context of the German debate over intermediate-range nuclear missiles to realize that major elements opposed to government policy, though only a small minority of the population, succeeded in winning acceptance of carefully crafted political labels--and, with them, acceptance of the credibility and legitimacy of their "movement" and its aims and methods. Had we not acceded to using the coinages of these groups--which threatened to bring about a "hot autumn," adopted exclusively for themselves the mantle of "peace" advocates, and claimed the numbers and unity to be called a "movement" (as opposed, say, to "anti-war protesters")--the issues, debate, and political momentum would have been quite different. By letting them usurp these particular labels, we basically denied ourselves the same labels and their attributes. Countless similar examples could be cited.

The focus of this particular case study, the RAF terrorist group, has been active in the Federal Republic of Germany since at least 1970. German terrorists have relied heavily on a variety of linguistic means in verbally attacking the German establishment. In doing so, they have created new verbs, adjectives, and compound nouns, in the process eroding vital parts of the German political lexicon, besides fomenting a series of highly visible, violent events. Their crude comparisons of present-day Germany with Germany's Nazi past, though devoid of any basis, still gnaws at the country's most exposed nerve.

It is not coincidental or insignificant that these same labels, and the recourse to linguistic tactics by violent political actors, are reflected in the statements of leaders of the radical anti-nuclear Greens Party. For instance, speaking on the intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) issue before the Bundestag in July 1983, Petra Kelly charged that the Kohl government was "criminalizing" the "nonviolent" peace movement. She called the government's acceptance of the NATO policy to site new intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the FRG illegal, anarchist, and an "enmity toward humanity" (menschenfeindlich). Kelly warned, as RAF terrorists repeatedly have, against a recurrence of "genocide," of Hitler, and of the FRG becoming an "American [military] rear area."

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This latter theme, with the FRG viewed alternatively as a recovery zone for those US forces perceived to be subjugating the Third World (per the RAF) or as the "final battleground" in a perceived scenario of the superpowers waging limited nuclear war in Europe (per the RAF and the Greens), is common among critics of the German political establishment. Such critics, focusing on the FRG as "victim," accuse the German establishment of making the country available for US purposes at the cost and peril of German national interests. Indeed, one of the so-called peace movement's most violence-prone groups, "Krieg dem Krieg" (War Against War), takes its name from the RAF's own credo used in communiques since 1977.

A central fact of terrorism is its objective of obtaining enough political power first to harness public attention and then to dictate political events. The Rand Corporation's Brian Jenkins years ago claimed that "terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead." His comment is still relevant. Indeed, it is the rare terrorist group that inflicts violence without at the same time propagating some rationale, explaining its objectives, and damning perceived wrongs and injustices. (Purists among terrorism analysts would argue that the lack of any stated political message disqualifies violent actors from the "terrorist" label--itself a denunciation. Without any political message, they become "criminals" or "crazies," as criminal psychologist Frederick Hacker has said.)

Where contemporary terrorists actually have achieved "strategic," not just "tactical" success, e.g., in Nicaragua, they have succeeded in convincing and intimidating political bystanders as well as in coercing their various terrorist targets. To understand the tactics and appraise the prospects of terrorist groups and their campaigns, one therefore must examine what such groups are saying and how they exploit the manipulability of language in pursuing their objectives.

#### Case Study and Methodology

With this thesis as the study's premise, published RAF event-related texts or communiques (also known as Kommandomeldungen or Bekennerbriefe) were examined for the period 1972-81. The objectives were to:

- determine the terrorists' attitudes toward and skills in the use of language and its importance in their operational considerations;
- relate relevant findings of contemporary linguistic studies to a specific field of political analysis; and
- corollate the linguistic and content manifestations of one terrorist group diachronically across a spectrum (of 10 years

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of RAF texts) in order to define broader categories of terrorism and gain both political and linguistic insights.

Various disciplines and perspectives are useful in such an effort. Insights and approaches were drawn from content analysis, linguistics (and its subfield of pragmatics), psychobiography, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and threat (or risk) analysis.

The tendency of politicians has been to denounce and dismiss adversaries' statements as propaganda. As terrorism increased, we often tended to label its users weird, if not suicidal, and to look for elements of psychosis in their statements--opening a new field of applied research to the psycholinguist. Political analysts and the policymakers they support need to recognize terrorists', revolutionaries', and other anti-establishment adversaries' statements as "political" keys to their beliefs and plans, motives and aims. We can find in their statements the core of their world and operational views, just as we have used the "operational code" and other methodologies to unlock the thoughts and values of the ruling Soviet elite.

One major shortcoming of the established content-analysis approach to text analysis, however, is its focus on word- and phrase-level meaning. Modern linguistics long ago moved its research onto the broader plane of text-level meaning and contextual meaning, the very areas most crucial for political analysis and also most troublesome to those seeking to apply computers to translation. By examining entire texts, singly and in their intertextual relationships, as this study attempted to do, one can better grasp trends, patterns, and meaningful contrasts in and between texts. Many of those contrasts, in turn, have their basis outside the domain of language, in the political and social environment of the speakers themselves--in this instance in terrorist cells.

The decision to study the German RAF was for several reasons an appropriate one. The group, active for more than 10 years, has had several generations of leadership. It is in a country relatively similar to the US in social structure, demography, level of industrialization, and cultural values. The RAF clearly shares with the earlier US Weathermen group and the terrorist Japanese Red Army basic roots in the student-dominated, anti-Vietnam protests of the 1960s. Tactically, though suffering severe personnel losses engendering at least three generations of leaders, it is a sophisticated terrorist entity whose primary targets have been the United States (the US military in particular), the West German establishment, and NATO. In short, excepting perhaps the totality of pro-Palestinian and radical Shia terrorism, the RAF has posed a more direct danger for a longer time to US interests, facilities, and officials than has any other terrorist group.

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The analysis undertaken for this study involved close examination of early RAF (so-called Baader-Meinhof) literature concerning group doctrine, its assessments and borrowings from Marx and Lenin, and initial attempts to "talk" young Germans into becoming revolutionaries. Although those attempts clearly failed, the early treatises--especially those of Ulrike Meinhof and Horst Mahler--provide the foundation and ideological wellspring of the RAF to this day. Scholarly appraisals of these early tracts agree, for the most part, that "action" per se is foremost in RAF thinking ("das Primat der Praxis") and that the grounding in Marx which they express lacks the will to accept or assimilate all of Marx. This is particularly true in the context of violence, revolution, and the terrorists' conviction that the demise of capitalism, while foreordained, must be expedited.<sup>2/</sup> Moreover, such philosophers as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Johan Galtung left an imprint on the earliest RAF leadership which still colors the group's thinking.

There are also, of course, uniquely German factors behind the RAF's development. Germany's Nazi past and the moral indignation of some youth over perceived German "complicity" in Vietnam and elsewhere in the developing world have played a vital role. Personal frustrations and individual psychological factors developing from familial situations played a part in certain cases.

From its inception the RAF captured the attention and often the imagination of the West German and other Western publics. The Western media initially likened them to Bonnie and Clyde. Many Germans soon felt the RAF to be a threat to German democracy and stability, reminiscent of the brown fascism which brought Hitler to power. (Jillian Becker's title, Hitler's Children, seeks to capitalize promotionally on this point.) On the other hand, the RAF failed in its attempt to mobilize a large number of supporters; nor did it spawn similar guerrilla formations.

The RAF has always held that the German worker, for whom the group has claimed to be waging its struggle, is hopelessly coopted by German material comforts and is beyond the reach of revolutionary ideals or motivations. Secondly, the RAF, like so many terrorist groups which must operate in fear of being identified, penetrated, and apprehended, is a staunchly exclusivist, hierarchical entity. It has never attained the size or organizational complexity of the Italian Red Brigades, but such were never RAF goals. Thus, we have seen emerge in West Germany and West Berlin, not a series of RAF

<sup>2/</sup> The "primacy of practice" (the RAF's slogan) and worship of "action" are not drawn from existing ideologies, Marxist or others, but from "New Left" frustration with ineffective conventional, nonviolent forms of popular resistance.

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units, but of other, less tightly knit groups, including the Revolutionary Cells (RZ), the former Movement Two June, and various ad hoc, smaller groups. Indeed, the RZ has capitalized on this key contrast with the RAF in calling for the spontaneous creation and operation of other "Revolutionary Cells."

The RAF's corpus of writings encompasses doctrinal texts; event-based communiques, letters, and exhortations to supporting groups; political declarations not tied to violent acts; and court trial (defense) statements. Two former German terrorists have published autobiographies; neither of them had belonged to the RAF, however. The number of available RAF interviews can be counted on one hand, and each was either conducted with written questions or subjected to editing. (Imprisoned RAF members, as a group and individually, have been uniformly uncooperative with persons seeking to draw political or psychological profiles of them.)

The statements by Mahler in his conversations with Interior Minister Gerhart Baum<sup>3/</sup> cast considerable light on the motivations and aspirations of the first RAF generation. They clearly spell out the moral indignation of the group, its utopian thinking, and its despair over traditional means of protest. Having failed to attract proponents of its revolutionary approach and continually criticized by the nonviolent West German left, the RAF evolved into an isolated group of terrorists who have sought to: 1) prove their ability to perform significant terrorist acts, thereby building their case for the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare while embarrassing the government; and 2) communicate their political thinking, view of the future, pleas for support, and justification of violence. The latter have been increasingly obscure texts limited to the time of the actual attacks.

### Basic Findings

The study of RAF texts revealed a great deal about the terrorists, their attitude toward and skills in language, and their motivations. The texts issued during the 43-day Hanns-Martin Schleyer kidnapping/murder incident clearly show the growing frustration and despair of the RAF terrorists as time passed without the desired FRG Government capitulation. The tone of the texts--laid down in adjective selection, sentence and text length, sentence rhythms, and types of labels and denunciations--illustrates changes in the writers' emotions. Initially almost superhuman in their sense of confidence and control, the terrorists lost that momentum within five days, resorting to hapless reiterations of previous (unmet)

3/ Der Minister und der Terrorist: Gespraechе zwischen Gerhart Baum und Horst Mahler, Jeschke and Malanowski, eds. (Reinbek/Hamburg: Spiegel, 1980).

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demands. In the end, they were almost pleading to be spared the need to kill their victim (Schleyer), an act necessary only for them to save face.

The decade-long set of texts illustrates variances in the RAF's language-based claims to specific events. The text writers, for example, routinely resort to passive voice or impersonal verbs in describing unintended injury or killing of victims; but they use active (and action) verbs when they are intent on proving their control over external events and their victims' lives. Here the RAF also relies on military vocabulary, both in keeping with standard revolutionary practice (theirs is a "war against imperialism") and to emphasize its power, retention of the offensive, and level of commitment.

Terrorism is a group phenomenon. The first person singular never appears in any RAF text. The texts stress "we-they" dichotomies, tending to say less about the RAF (in positive self-appraisal) than about the enemy (negative comments about imperialism, the US and FRG Governments, and prevailing power structures generally).

Terrorism, defined in terms of a set of violent tactics, rests on a program of threats and the means necessary to lend those threats ample credibility to create political leverage through fear. The RAF texts, however, are virtually devoid of specific linguistic threats or commands, the kind identifiable via traditional content analysis; for example, there are few "if..., then" or grammatically imperative constructions. Rather, these linguistic forms of threats and commands are realized pragmatically through indirect linguistic means at the level of the entire text rather than sentence units. Thus, one cannot find the explicit threats that most policymakers and security managers want to see identified.

A basic critical finding concerning the RAF's use of language and reliance on written texts to reach its "audience" is that, with very rare exceptions, there is only one text (message unit) for each RAF attack. That is, the group issued a single statement (always after the attack, never in anticipation of it) and made no recourse to a second pronouncement (the Schleyer operation was an exception). Viewed tactically, such a practice is a strong indication that the elitist RAF indeed has sought no broad constituency of political support, desired no dialogue with the radical German left (as Meinhof once did), and engaged in no major recruitment campaigns. Indeed, a 1982 RAF letter published in a West Berlin alternative newspaper called for a united front but explicitly excluded any thought of new RAF units or recruits--in marked contrast with the more egalitarian Revolutionary Cells.

RAF commentary on language, though less specific than that of the RZ terrorists, documents the RAF leadership's concern that the

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group's statements accurately reflect its politics and not be susceptible to ambiguity, misinterpretation, or government manipulation. RAF leader Gudrun Ensslin's ire over a support group's use of the vital label "political prisoner" in a way which could have included Rudolf Hess in its meaning is but one illustration of such concern with language and labels. Similarly, RAF reference to "forced feeding" (Zwangsernährung) of hunger strikers, rather than the government's preferred neutral term "artificial feeding" (künstliche Ernährung), was explicit and carefully calculated to convey that the state itself was committing violence and human rights abuses in keeping RAF hunger strikers alive.

Between the Schleyer incident in September-October 1977 and mid-1982, there was no reported RAF attempt to engage the German left in a meaningful political dialogue. In July 1982, a long tract attributed to the RAF broke this silence but offered little more than a rambling plea for more anti-imperialist struggle alongside the RAF. No RAF texts are on record in the group's entire existence that warn of or announce actual attacks. A number of alleged RAF intentions have been reported in the media--everything from poisoning Stuttgart's water supply to using missiles against Lufthansa in 1977--but no written texts of the threats are available. Thus, no basis exists for seeking to predict specific RAF terrorist events based on prior, written, textual evidence.

What one does find in a detailed examination of such event-based texts as those used for this study, some 29 in all, are insights into the group's thinking and its evolution; its attempt (in a single text) to reach differentiated audiences with similar arguments; its reluctant acceptance of the need to communicate at all; and its attitude toward and capability for producing linguistically effective statements.

The investigation yielded several new insights and reinforced others. First and foremost, terrorist statements remain the most readily available and potentially productive avenue into terrorist thinking. The most promising approach to terrorist (and perhaps all political) texts is investigation at the text level by analysts with native-speaker competency working on originals. (Translation all but destroys text-level and contextual meanings in the sociocultural context of the writers. Nuances are lost, metaphors overlooked, epithets overplayed or unseen.) The assessment technique seems to require both a content-analytical and a text-linguistic appraisal. Psycholinguistic insights can be very helpful if we agree on the meaning of the term psycholinguistics, which does not merely connote psychologists reading translated texts.

Analysis must not stop with quantitative or statistical data but must examine on a text-level basis the questions of labeling,

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threats, speaker emotions, logic and argumentation, metaphors, text cohesion and development, and other related questions. These and other text features (present or absent) enable us to infer other things about the intended audience of the terrorists, the terrorists' sophistication, their attitude toward claimed constituencies, and their ability to articulate their political beliefs and the seriousness of those beliefs.

The texts contain the most persuasive arguments the terrorists can muster to enlarge their following; they constitute a crucial body of information for comparison with other data, e.g., opinion research on popular responses. Terrorism is, after all, only the most extreme pole along a continuum of sociopolitical frustration and anger in those societies where it appears. As such, the texts prepared by terrorism's users provide the political analyst or country specialist with the most starkly defined portrait of the political opposition, generational conflict, youth discontent, or general social malaise in the areas where it surfaces.

Terrorists in the FRG are the most extreme example of a growing sociopolitical alienation, much of which is felt by Germans aged 35 and under. These young Germans are gradually assuming the most influential positions in German politics, industry, labor, education, and the media. Indeed, at least half of the identified German terrorists were preparing for, if not already at work in, these professions.

Excepting the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, most of the world's terrorists since Castro's takeover have not managed to build their efforts into a revolutionary challenge capable of turning out the state or regime enemy. In Western Europe, at least, this is due largely to the prevailing factors of Western anti-violent legal and moral values, basic social and economic well-being, viable political pluralism, and effective and accepted government institutions in all branches. From another perspective, West European terrorist groups--German ones like the RAF in particular--have failed to convince their would-be constituencies of the truth of their accusations and criticisms or of the likelihood that a new, better "revolutionary" order would result from their terrorist efforts.

The conclusion this study reaches--from the standpoint of both linguist and political analyst--is that, just as physical violence cannot go on unimpeded, neither can terrorist statements and claims go unanalyzed or unanswered. Whether US concern is over the Soviet Union's ability to manipulate European attitudes toward NATO and US security policies or over a terrorist group's impact on a given population, the task for our analysts and public diplomatists is the same: We must effectively identify and reject

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the adversary's labels and assert our own. In the poignant words of one German commentator, "...a conspiracy of silence...will always benefit the party capable of spreading the greatest fear." This holds equally true for the broadest strategic nuclear context and for the growing number of terrorists.

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